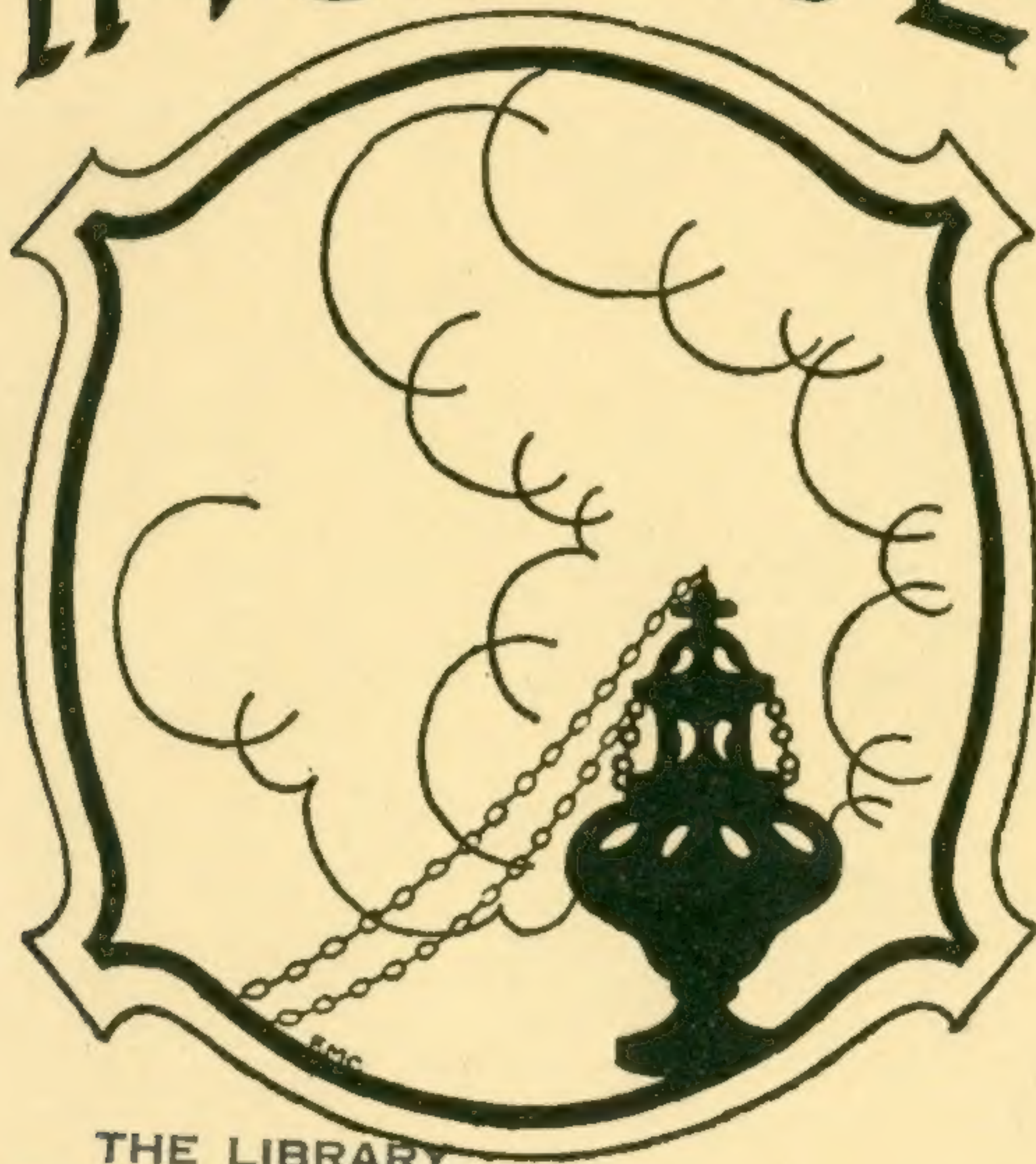


INCENSE



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INCENSE

IT would indeed be strange if incense were not used by Christians, for from earliest times it has been associated with worship. It was used alike by Assyrians and Babylonians ; and discoveries in Egypt depict kings swinging censers. And so, too, in Jewish worship. The thirtieth chapter of the book of Exodus contains instructions for the building of an altar of incense ; “ And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon : of shittim wood shalt thou make it.” The first book of the Chronicles states that certain of the Levites were appointed as overseers of “ the vessels, and of all the instruments of the sanctuary, and the fine flour, and the wine, and the oil, and the frankincense, and the spices.”

Christianity is the fulfilment of all other religions. The Church does not hesitate to use pre-Christian and pagan practices, knowing that what

has been used by man from time immemorial, can be sanctified and used in the worship of the one true God.

And does not the Gospel open with the use of incense? Zacharias was burning incense "according to the custom of the priest's office" when the angel Gabriel appeared unto him "on the right hand of the altar of incense" to announce the coming birth of John the Baptist (Luke i. 8). And incense was one of the three gifts offered to the new-born Christ by the Gentile world, depicting thereby his Godhead. How fitting that the Church, made up so largely of the people of the Gentiles, should continue to offer incense in her outward worship of God.

Christians of the first centuries would have been familiar with the practice of carrying incense before prominent people as a sign of honour. If it was right that it should be carried in procession before a Roman consul, why should it not be carried before a Christian Bishop? At first incense was only used in processions, and we have a description of the procession in Rome setting out from the sacristy before Mass preceded by one of the sub-deacons swinging a censer and by seven acolytes

carrying tapers. The custom of carrying incense before the bishop developed into swinging it before him at his throne; and into using it symbolically to things of special honour, such as the altar, and the book of the Gospels. So, in time, developed the custom of censuring persons and things.

Incense is used four times at a Solemn Mass. At the Introit, the celebrant, having blessed the incense,—“be blessed by him in whose honour thou shalt be burned,”—censes the altar cross, any relics which may be on the altar, the altar itself, and is then himself censed with three double swings by the deacon of the Mass.

Before the singing of the Gospel incense is again blessed by the celebrant, the deacon then kneeling and praying that as Isaiah's lips were cleansed by hot burning coals, so may his heart and lips be cleansed that he may worthily proclaim the Gospel. The Gospel procession is then formed, led by the thurifer carrying the smoking censer, and completed by the deacon solemnly carrying the book of the Gospels. Before singing the Gospel the deacon censes the book, bowing to it before and after, a potent reminder that it is the Word of God.

At the Offertory the incense is blessed with a special prayer, "Through the intercession of blessed Michael the archangel standing at the right hand of the altar of incense, and of all his elect, may the Lord vouchsafe to bless this incense and to receive it for a sweet-smelling-savour." The fact that it was St. Gabriel who was standing at the right hand of the altar of incense in the vision of Zacharias, and that many medieval missals have Gabriel's name in this prayer, makes it at least possible that St. Michael's name has crept in by mistake. The censuring at this point is the most solemn one—and suitably so. For if there was censuring at the Introit, the beginning of the Mass of the Catechumens, it is fitting that it should be more solemn now at the beginning of the Mass of the Faithful. On this occasion the bread and the wine are censured; next the altar and the celebrant as described above; and then, in turn, clergy in choir, deacon, sub-deacon, servers and laity. So does the smoke rising in the sanctuary depict the united prayers of all present.

Finally, and this is a late innovation unknown before the thirteenth century, the Blessed Sacrament is censured at the two elevations at the consecration. On this occasion the incense is not

blessed. Only at Requiem Masses, when he is not otherwise occupied holding the paten, does the sub-deacon perform this censuring; otherwise at a High Mass it is done on his behalf by the thurifer.

Incense is also used during the singing of the *Benedictus* and the *Magnificat* when the offices are sung solemnly; at solemn blessings; and at Absolutions of the Dead.

Usually the incense (an aromatic substance obtained from certain resinous trees) is carried in a box, called a boat, so described from its shape. Heated charcoal is put into the bowl of the censer or thurible, and the incense is taken from the boat by a spoon, and laid on the charcoal. The censer as used to-day hangs by chains from a disc by which it is held. In its primitive form, the censer was quite different in construction, being more like a vase with a perforated cover.

On two occasions the incense is not burned. At the consecration of an altar the relics of two martyrs and three grains of incense are placed in a cavity cut into the surface of the altar, the cavity then being sealed up. And the five grains of incense inserted in the Paschal Candle on Holy Saturday

are blessed but not burned. They are inserted at the words of the *Exsultet*, "Accept, O holy Father, this our evening sacrifice of incense," and it has been pointed out that the word incense in this context has only a figurative meaning, the sacrifice of incense referring to the candle itself. So the insertion of the grains of incense may have occurred by accident! But if so what a happy accident, for what more splendid symbol of the Risen Christ adorned with his five wounds than the lighted Paschal Candle!

And the meaning of incense? St. Thomas Aquinas says, "We use incense, not as commanded by a ceremonial precept of Law, but as prescribed by the Church, accordingly we do not use it in the same fashion as it was ordered under the Old Law. It has reference to two things: first, to the reverence due to this sacrament [that is, the Blessed Sacrament], in order by its good odour, to remove any disagreeable smell that may be about the place; secondly, it serves to show the effect of grace, wherewith Christ was filled as with a good odour. According to Genesis xxvii. 27, 'Behold, the odour of my son is like the odour of a ripe field'; and from Christ it spreads to the faithful

by the work of his ministers. According to II Corinthians ii. 14, 'He manifesteth the odour of his knowledge by us in every place'; and therefore when the altar which represents Christ has been incensed on every side, then all are incensed in their proper order."

Incense is symbolical of prayer rising to God as depicted in the book of the Revelation: "And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of the saints . . . And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand" (viii. 3-4). But it may also be thought of as an act of cleansing and preparation; and as an offering made to God. All these three interpretations may be seen at Mass. The altar and offerings of bread and wine cleansed and prepared at the Introit and at the Offertory. The united prayers ascending to God at the Offertory. The offering made to God—to his Word at the Gospel, to himself present in the Blessed Sacrament at the consecration. And in this last context we may thankfully remember the examples of the early martyrs who preferred to

suffer and die rather than offer incense on pagan altars, for they acknowledged only one God, Jesus Christ.

But richest of all meanings is its "waste"—this precious thing destroyed with no other purpose than generosity. And that is the fulness of prayer : to want to give without thought of gain. "Wherefore this waste ?" ask the Simons. "Wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also . . . shall be spoken of"—answers Christ of all that is wasted for love of him.

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